

My Word-Greensboro News & Record

"My Manhattan"

by Hannah Draeger Ross

Many of us can close our eyes and remember the view from our bedroom window when we were kids. We can visualize getting over the Chicken-Pox, leaning against the window watching our friends playing in the street below. Or remember the tree outside the window that housed a family of birds every spring.

I lived in Union City, New Jersey in a tall apartment buildings. Our town held avenues of neon lights, our trees were gray twiggy things that never seemed to grow much. Our streets were filled with kids playing games like "Stickball" and neighbors hanging out on the front steps of the buildings talking about who appeared on "The Ed Sullivan Show" and why their kids should be kept away from the deep dark music of Jim Morrison and The Doors.

My bedroom view was of the skyline of Manhattan , only the Hudson River separated us, a few scant miles from one of the most famous views in the world. The Empire State building stood tall against the horizon.

I would sit for hours listening to my records (especially Janis Joplin) and gaze out of the window over the fire escape railing at my beloved city. I watched those "twin towers" rise from the ground and remember thinking to myself:

"When they are finally complete I will be living in New York City!"

I spent all my free time taking the number 109 bus into city of Manhattan, skipping class, auditioning for all the off-Broadway productions I could find. My roman-sandaled feet walked every block of Greenwich Village, poetry readings at the *Café Whaa*, book readings at *McDoogal's Book Store*, this was my real neighborhood.

During the Vietnam era people protested at the White Hall Induction Center in downtown Manhattan, most of them wore headbands and burned their draft cards.

The "Summer of Love" in San Francisco was mirrored on the East Coast. Central Park was our meeting place, young people flew kites and wore halters, a few brave souls copied the antics of the television show "Laugh-In" and painted their bodies with Peter-Max swirls of color and Peace Signs just like that show's starlet Goldie Hawn did.

Kids with ultra wide bell-bottom jeans filled the streets, hip-huggers that would make the outfits of Brittany Spears look tame! I tried out for the new musical "Hair". The part went to a skinny blonde girl from Long Island with dimples. I was a skinny dark-haired Jersey Girl without dimples. My heavy eye make-up was intended to make me look like Liz Taylor, the casting director obviously hadn't noticed any such similarity. I was devastated.

I walked for hours ending up at the site of the new World Trade Center. Eating a pushcart hot-dog I gazed up at the budding construction site as skeletons of steel were already in place. They projected in 1966 that it would open in 1970. 1 WTC did open December 3rd, 1970 and would be destroyed September 11, 2001.

The project was a massive undertaking. I have never seen anything so gigantic in my life. New Jersey looked so tiny on the other side of the river. We had the Maxwell House coffee sign to brag about, I could see my ever-changing skyline in the distance. The Maxwell House sign tipped a big coffee cup against the city of New York.

The following year, my uncle John came to live with our family and worked in "the city" at the Metropolitan Opera Company in their wardrobe department. He was to become my new traveling companion as I was forbidden to continue my travels alone *or* during school days. I had been absent quite a bit of my Junior year, and ultimately caught with a bogus note from my mother. I was suspended and grounded for a month. Finally, after many tears and playing rock and roll music until my mother went crazy, I was allowed to visit my adopted city again. But *only* with my uncle.

As the years flew by, this wonderful relative introduced me to opera and I introduced him to my love of New York City. We discovered Manhattan together. When he passed away last year, he left me four symphonies (never produced), a box of 78 records and a New York Mets hat.

We had both been in attendance at the opening of the underground Path subway beneath the Twin Towers, showered with confetti, we cheered along with the crowd and took the train back to Jersey that evening, bragging to the family about the event.

In the years that followed I took that same Path train back and forth to work in Manhattan. Much Later, I stood waiting for my husband as he and I met under the Towers to eat dinner in the city or catch a play. My daughter and I eventually took the same trips together. Before I left for a new home in North Carolina, I took both my kids to the city one more time, to Macy's, to Rockefeller Plaza, to Ferrara's Pastry in Little Italy. I wanted them to remember the city this way.

I guess you have realized by now where this story is headed. The day the Towers fell. I was at home working. The CNN report droned on in the background, I heard the words "World Trade devastation..". The Towers were on fire. The Towers were falling. I called my daughter.

"My God" I muttered, "What have they done..."

In November of 2001 I flew home. No, not to New Jersey, back to Manhattan, a city I finally got to live in for six wonderful years.

I came by van with my two grown children. And when I reached the part of the New Jersey Turnpike that offers the first view of Manhattan my heart broke. My beautiful Towers were really gone. The skyline was now like the smile of a child with missing teeth...my towers were missing.

Once in the city I visited friends and shopped and avoided going to the site. By the next day I was compelled to go. The streets were filled with last minute holiday shoppers, a few blocks away, scrawny fir trees were being sold at fifty dollars a pop. Yes, life does go on. All the restaurants were open , stores were filled. But the closer I came to the actual street where St. Peter's church stood, the lines of people came into view. I noticed all the photos glued to the church fence, the faces of the dead and missing stared out at the crowd, many of whom were in tears. Strangers cried and reached out to hug other strangers.

I stood at the corner and viewed that site, the spiraled wall we all came to recognize from news reports stood silent in the distance. This flag-draped site that held so many happy memories to me was nothing but rubble.

The fireman priest who died, our former priest Father Mike Judge, from St. Joseph's Church in East Rutherford, New Jersey. He was our favorite priest years before and everyone loved him. Who would have ever guessed he would die a hero in an attack on New York City?

The public grew to know about other casualties by stories in the news and on television. There was the young dad, who stayed by his co-workers side because he could not leave him behind. The father of five who called his wife on his cell phone and left an answering machine message of love that she will always keep and treasure. Then there was a woman who worked her way from South America to the *Windows of the World* Restaurant. All these inhabitants "were the Towers". Television does not convey what happened. You have to actually see the site to understand the depth of it all.

We all have to remember those people, that city and those buildings. A famous book by Thomas Wolfe bears the title "You can't go home again", sometimes you can. Bravo New York.